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Impressions and Representations

From passions and virtues to persons and bodies

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Hume is notorious for arguing that passions have no cognitive content, while some recent commentators have tried to interpret his theory in a cognitivist way. It is true that Hume attributes to some passions, namely indirect ones, certain relations to cognitive elements. These elements, though, are only ‘attending circumstances’, and Hume is quite persistent in claiming that passions in themselves have no ‘representative quality’. Actually, according to Hume all impressions, of sensation as well as of reflexion, are ‘original existences’ that have ‘no reference to any other object’. Only ideas are representations that can agree or disagree with their objects. How, then, do ideas represent their objects, especially if they, as Hume claims, differ from impressions only in the degree of ‘force and vivacity’ and have no other intrinsic quality that distinguishes them from impressions? I try to answer this question with my focus on the ideas of durable objects in the actual world, namely persons and bodies. I choose to discuss persons as they appear in the social world of Books II and III of the *Treatise*, rather than from the point of view of the introspective thinker of Book I. Thus, persons are considered as having publicly observable features that are pleasant or unpleasant to the eye, namely good and bad behaviour, beauty and deformity, riches and property, among others. These features make up their characters. Common words enable different spectators to discuss and evaluate the characters of persons in a quasi-objective way without actually observing their behaviour from the same point of view or actually feeling the same degree of pleasure or pain from the observation. This Hume explains in connection with the general point of view from which we talk and think about morals. Thus, we come to refer to characters as if there were such durable principles inherent in persons, though in reality we have only bundles of momentary perceptions that are connected with words by custom. The same mechanism also explains how we can talk about other durable objects, notably persons and bodies. Here there is an obvious analogy with the case of abstract ideas. In both cases words or ideas connected with them become representations by customary, associative principles that connect particular perceptions together. We find in Hume a nominalist theory concerning durable individuals, along with one concerning universals.